

An Introduction to Holy Week

Palm/Passion Sunday



Holy Week is the most somber week of the Church Calendar, for it commemorates the last days of Jesus' life, when he suffered betrayal, denial, flogging, crucifixion, and death. (Hence this week is also called "Passion Week," after the Latin word *passio*, suffering.)

Holy Week begins in the middle of Palm/Passion Sunday, which starts with the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but then transitions into the reading of the Passion story from one of the Gospels. At this transition, we "officially" enter Holy Week.

There is no dismissal following the Palm/Passion Sunday service, since the services of Holy Week are in fact one long service – Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday – all culminating in the Great Vigil of Easter.

Maundy Thursday



Maundy Thursday is the day when the Church remembers Jesus' last supper with his disciples, during which Jesus told them to eat bread which he said was his body and drink wine which he said was his blood. He then commanded them (and all of us followers of Jesus down through the centuries) to "Do this in remembrance of me" – a command that we obey each time we celebrate the Eucharist (or Holy Communion).

There are actually *several* commandments that Jesus gives on this day, if we draw from all of the Gospels. In fact, the name of this day, "Maundy" Thursday, comes from the Latin word for commandment, "*mandatum*." In John's Gospel (from which we always read on Maundy Thursday) the commandment "Do this in remembrance of me" is not given. Rather, John focuses on Jesus getting up from the table, tying a servant's towel around his waist, and washing his disciples' feet. He then tells them, "...if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (*John 13:14-15*) In effect, Jesus is commanding us to serve another, following his own example. In remembrance of this, we wash one another's feet on Maundy Thursday. (Don't worry - this is totally optional!)

Another command that Jesus makes this night comes after Jesus has told his disciples that he is like a grape vine, and the disciples are like the branches of the vine. In order to have life, the branches must abide (remain) in the vine. So Jesus commands his disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you... abide in my love." (*John 15:4a, 9b*)

But the central commandment that Jesus makes on Maundy Thursday comes again from John's Gospel, when Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (*John 13:34*) This *new* commandment is so important that he repeats it later this same night (*John 15:12*).

If you read through chapters 13-15 in John's Gospel, you will see what a central theme "commandment" is on this Maundy Thursday! And there is a reason behind all these commandments: "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (*John 15:17*)

Following Holy Communion (the Eucharist) on this night, the altar is stripped of any decoration, leaving everything bare or covered in black. The reserved sacrament (blessed bread and wine) is removed from the tabernacle behind the altar, leaving it open and empty, and the sanctuary lamp (the red light over the altar which shines whenever Jesus' presence in bread and wine is in the tabernacle) is extinguished. The bare altar and the extinguished sanctuary lamp together powerfully convey the sense of abandonment Jesus must have felt when his disciples denied him and fled (indeed, Jesus also felt forsaken by God!), as well as the profound guilt, emptiness, and grief that the disciples undoubtedly felt when their master was taken from them, condemned, and crucified.

As on Palm/Passion Sunday, worshipers leave in silence without a dismissal, since the liturgies of Palm/Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter are in reality one uninterrupted drama. Tomorrow's Good Friday liturgy will simply take up where tonight's leaves off.

Following the service, we observe the **Maundy Watch**: worshipers are invited to pray for one hour sometime during the night, in answer to Jesus' question of his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "...could you not stay awake with me one hour?" (*Matthew 26:40*) The Chapel will be open all night long for you to pray. There is a sign-up sheet posted on the door in the narthex on which you can commit to taking an hour-long "shift" sometime during the night. If you would like to pray but are unable or would prefer not to come to the Chapel, you may do so at home; please sign up and indicate "home."

Good Friday



On Good Friday we remember Jesus' crucifixion, so it is a somber, austere service. Silence is what is called for. We read the Passion story according to John. A large wooden cross has been brought into the choir area, and we meditate on its meaning for our lives, pondering the Life poured out for us in love. The ancient (6th Century) haunting hymn "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle" is sung.

There is no Holy Communion on Good Friday. Jesus is dead and in the tomb, and his first disciples think he is lost to them forever; so we share this sense of emptiness and profound grief. Holy Communion would be an out-of-place consolation on this day of desolation. Instead, we recite and sing psalms and songs of lament. We pray for the state of the whole world. The song asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" We are invited into that scene, to experience the loss, the pain, and the sadness.

On Good Friday, as on Maundy Thursday, the service ends in silence, without a dismissal, since all of Holy Week's solemn services are part of the same whole. We are not dismissed because participating in Jesus' crucifixion is incomplete without participating in his resurrection. Holy Week culminates in the Great Vigil of Easter, the principal service of the Christian year, which every Eucharist throughout the year echoes.

The Great Vigil of Easter



In the dark of early Easter Morning, a fire is kindled. A voice sings out "The Light of Christ!" The people respond, "Thanks be to God." The Easter Vigil is the holiest moment in the Christian calendar. The liturgy is otherworldly, intentionally. In the darkness, the great and saving acts of God throughout history are recalled.

The people process into the church and the cantor continues, "This is the night when you brought the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land... This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave." This is the night, this is the night, this is the night... we hear it again and again.

The service then proceeds into a series of readings, silences, songs, and prayers. We read more of the Bible at this service than at any other service in the year. The Church remembers God's saving deeds as recorded in the Hebrew scriptures. All of it builds to the reading of the Gospel of the Resurrection, the story of the women and men who followed Jesus discovering that Jesus is risen.

For almost two thousand years the Great Vigil of Easter has been the principal time when converts to the faith are baptized. Even if there is no baptism, all worshippers renew their own baptismal vows. The central meaning of Holy Baptism is that we die with Christ to our sinful, false self and are raised to new life with him and in him. What better time to recall this than on the anniversary of Jesus' rising from the dead?

After the Baptism, the darkened sanctuary erupts in light. The priest proclaims the first Alleluia of Easter: "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" and the people respond, "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!" Bells, which worshippers have brought from home, are rung. We celebrate Holy Eucharist together in the bright church, and go forth into the world having been strengthened by Word and Sacrament in our participation in the Life of the Risen Christ.